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A REFLECTION
ON MODERN CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP
IN LAY LANGUAGE

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by
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ABSTRACT

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The project is based on the premise that the results and implications of modern scholarship in such fields as theology, Biblical studies, and philosophy of religion are not being adequately communicated to persons, both inside and outside the Church, who are not specialists in religious studies and that the religious orientations of persons are significantly affected by this lack of communication. Part One describes the background of this problem and explains the writing of a broadly based, nontechnical document addressing this matter which is directed to nonspecialists and which is contained in Part Two. The document includes an introduction, chapters on the Bible, God, evil and the power of God, providence and prayer, Jesus, and sin and salvation, and a concluding chapter. Part Three consists of evaluation and conclusions in reference to the responses of three nonspecialists who read and evaluated the document. The responses of these readers are included in the Appendix.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

I. THE PROJECT BACKGROUND

The modern world has reached the point where vast resources and human energy are put into study and research on an unprecedented range of subjects. The depth as well as the breadth of this "knowledge explosion" is truly astonishing. Opportunities for everyone to gain access to this knowledge have never been greater. Even so, the rate of its expansion and the complexity of its detail are such that few people can begin to keep pace with it.

Like it or not, we are a society of specialists, and we share the liabilities as well as the benefits of this specialization. Huge gaps exist between what specialists know about the things in which they specialize and what others know about these specialities. In many cases these gaps are of little practical consequence. Reaping the benefits of some kinds of special knowledge does not require that everyone understand in detail what has been learned. In other cases, however, such gaps may produce far more immediate effects. In these cases people may act and make decisions in substantially different ways than they would in the absence of such gaps.

The subject of religion is clearly one area of the latter kind. If people form their religious beliefs on the basis of discredited ideas about the world, those beliefs will certainly be different than if they were based on the

best study and thought. If people's attitudes and opinions are in turn influenced by faulty religious beliefs, their decisions and actions are likewise different than if they were influenced by more mature religious beliefs.

Scholars in seminaries and departments of religion and philosophy have engaged in much research and thought about such matters as the Bible, the nature of God, and the nature of the world. Professional church leaders and other students of these scholars have occasion to study the work of these specialists. Beyond these scholars and students, however, knowledge of this work is limited. Even in churches served by professionals who have had access to it, parishioners' awareness of it is spotty at best. Indeed, the large majority of people today, whether church members or not, remain uninformed on the results of religious scholarship.

It is, of course, quite open to debate whether in any particular instance the views of scholars are superior to other views. Few would likely wish to insist upon the validity of any viewpoint merely because some authority maintains its accuracy. But most people would probably agree that those who have studied and thought most seriously and thoroughly about a given subject are most apt to improve upon existing ideas.

The religious beliefs of those who call themselves Christian are today influenced by a considerable number of

sources, among which scholars of religion are not particularly prominent. These influences include traditional doctrines of various sorts, traditional practices of various denominations, both traditional and individual interpretations of the Bible, the preaching and pronouncements of ordained and unordained priests, pastors, evangelists, and other assorted spokesmen, and the popular views of other church members and of friends and neighbors of various persuasions.

In many respects the shape of religious belief which emerges from these influences is quite different from that which modern scholarship would tend to produce. There is, in fact, a rather large gap between the ideas which such scholarship has generated and those upon which most Christians rely for their religious orientation.

This is not to say by any means that all clergy have been equally influenced by the results of modern scholarship. During the 1960's, for instance, "conservative and liberal clergymen found themselves contesting a large number of religious, political, ethical, and organizational questions."¹ By and large, the posture of the more liberal clergy most influenced by modern thought was not well received among lay persons. According to studies conducted

¹Harold E. Quinley, "The Dilemma of an Activist Church," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, XIII, 1 (March 1974), 5.

by Harold E. Quinley of Stanford University, "our survey clearly demonstrated that most laymen reacted unfavorably to the views and actions of clergy activists during the 1960's."²

There were undoubtedly any number of reasons for this sort of reaction. One likely reason--which is not easily subject to empirical verification--is that lay persons simply could not understand why clergy thought and acted as they did because most had not had occasion to engage in the type of theological reflection which influenced these clergy. "In some respects, such a gap between clergy and laity should be viewed as an inevitable consequence of the differences which exist between these two groups with respect to education, professional training, the centrality of religion, and the like."³

Moreover, this confusion among lay persons was surely perpetuated by the very fact that clergy themselves were divided. In assessing this split, Quinley writes that "the basic 'cause' of these divisions within the ministry--and the central component in the clerical belief system--obviously resides in the contrasting theological orientations of these two groups of clergymen."⁴

Other studies also support this conclusion, as well as the observation that at least some lay persons have

²Ibid., 10.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 5.

adopted the views of more liberal clergy. In other words, the gap is not strictly and solely between clergy and laity. The point of difference is theological orientation, which cuts across the clergy/laity distinction. A large, nationwide survey of Presbyterian ministers and lay persons is one of the more recent evidences of this situation.

Disagreement arises over the importance and proper forms of mission and outreach outside the membership. The main disagreement is between evangelism and social involvement. The principal source of the disagreement is theological; the data show great variation of belief about central Christian teachings. Two distinct theological viewpoints are discernable, and they are related to church priority preferences. The theological split is greater than differences between ministers and laity; it is the basic source of disagreement.⁵

The nature of the variation in belief about teachings is explained in the following summary.

Persons with strong faith in eternal life, having a dualistic view of humanity (separating spiritual and secular aspects), and believing in the literal authority of Scripture, stress evangelism in order to save souls. On the other hand, persons with weaker faith in an afterlife, holding a unitary view of man, and seeing limited authority in Scripture, perceive the church's proper mission in terms of its impact on community and history.⁶

That numerous lay persons do not share the views of those of their professional leaders who have been strongly influenced by modern scholarship might be surprising in view

⁵Dean R. Hoge, Everett L. Perry, and Gerald L. Klever, "Theology as a Source of Disagreement About Protestant Church Goals and Priorities," Review of Religious Research, XIX,2 (Winter 1978), 116.

⁶Ibid., 134.

of the very availability of many such leaders to help bridge the gap in a way which is simply not the case with respect to other sorts of knowledge gaps. There are a number of reasons why, despite the training of these leaders, both large numbers of church members and the general populace remain largely uninformed about the contributions scholarship can make to religion.

In the first place, churches are highly traditional organizations. In some churches doctrines and practices are much more formal than in others. Tradition, however, can be equally powerful whether it is formal or informal. It is difficult in this circumstance to introduce ideas which may be seen as conflicting with traditional views. To the extent such conflict arises, leaders may be seen as undermining the authority of the church and consequently their own authority as well. In addition, such conflicts may produce disturbing disorientations in the minds of church members, who may find themselves more confused than assisted by ideas which were intended to help them. In view of these problems, church leaders are understandably reluctant to risk introducing unfamiliar ways of thinking about religion despite their dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs.

Second, church leaders and the educational programs of their churches address groups of people whose membership constantly changes. A mobile society with an ever-expanding

agenda of activities guarantees the random movement of people in and out of every church. It is quite impossible to keep track of what all these people think or know about anything. It is thus all the harder to provide significant educational opportunities for such a diverse group. This condition does not encourage the raising of important, complex, and perhaps disconcerting new ideas when people are moving in and out like substitutes in a basketball game.

Third, inasmuch as the doctrines and practices of churches consist of intricately interwoven fabrics of views on a host of subjects, a shift in perspective regarding any one of these subjects unavoidably has implications for other subjects which relate to it. The raising of important questions leads to other questions, which in turn lead to still others. No one is likely to be satisfied with an approach which refuses to consider these implications or defers them indefinitely. Church members who encounter such an approach may well feel as if they have been placed on a sinking boat, and frustration rather than enlightenment is the result. On the other hand, given the first two problems mentioned above, attempting to deal thoroughly with a broad range of questions has its own difficulties. This dilemma is yet another reason why church professionals may not be anxious to open a Pandora's box of nontraditional new perspectives even though they are convinced of the value and promise of these perspectives.

Fourth, there is the problem of parishioners' own motivation to learn. If they are to benefit from the professional training of their leaders, they must be willing to commit themselves sufficiently to participate in educational opportunities made available to them. Dealing with complex and difficult questions requires more than merely casual or occasional involvement in study and reflection about these matters. In part, low motivation to consider the nature of religious beliefs may be traced to limited perception of the relationship between religious beliefs and the character of day-to-day living. If religious beliefs are thought of mainly in abstract terms whose concrete implications are seldom considered, church members are understandably unlikely to exhibit wide interest in analyzing their beliefs.

Despite these obstacles, the gap which we have been considering remains an important problem which ought not to be ignored. Unlike some knowledge gaps which do not have serious day-to-day consequences for large numbers of people, religious beliefs based on distorted assumptions have enormous impact upon persons' very approach to life. This impact results regardless of the source of the distorted assumptions--whether they come from inadequate viewpoints of traditional Christianity or from mistaken theories of secular culture. In this regard it is important to recognize that church members are not the only ones who suffer from whatever a lack of knowledge does to their religious beliefs.

To the extent that persons outside the church perceive such ill-informed beliefs to be the best vision Christianity has to offer, their own religious perspectives are skewed. In some respects such persons may already have realized without the aid of scholars the inadequacies of some traditional Christian views. Having done so, they may be inclined to dismiss Christianity as hopelessly out of touch with reality.

Dean M. Kelley documents the rapid membership growth of conservative churches in recent years and a corresponding decline in more liberal churches. Kelley attributes this growth among conservative churches to the "strictness" of their views, characterized by absolutism, conformity, and fanaticism.⁷ These are traits of a "strong" religion, which appeals to many people because it provides meaning by demanding unquestioning commitment.⁸

On the other hand, so-called "ecumenical mainline" churches, according to Kelley, are in the process of failing because they attempt to be "reasonable, rational, courteous, responsible, restrained, and receptive to outside criticism" and do not wish to "let dogmatism, judgmental moralism, or obsessions with cultic purity stand in the way of such

⁷Dean M. Kelley, Why Conservative Churches Are Growing (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 78-81.

⁸Ibid., 47-55.

cooperation and service."⁹ These churches espouse "qualities which . . . conduce, not to the strength of the quest for meaning, but to its weakening: relativism, diversity, dialogue--leniency."¹⁰

Kelley says his book "points to the contrast in membership trends as a way of asking 'What is going on here? What is this religion "business," and who is doing it well?'"¹¹ But Kelley's thesis merely assumes that churches which are growing are "doing religion well": whatever religious mode attracts people is, without question, appropriate. This project, however, takes strong exception to that opinion.

I do not dispute the fact that vast numbers of people are indeed attracted to conservative religious groups because of the strength of conviction found there. I think, however, that the gravitation toward these orientations is due in considerable part to the assumption by many that they ought to be able to be certain about religious matters whether or not there exists any real possibility for such certainty. Americans often have the idea that strong people know exactly what they think and say so in no uncertain terms. Religion calls for equally uncompromising definitude. But, as with a number of other American myths, the

⁹Ibid., xv-xvi.

¹⁰Ibid., 175.

¹¹Ibid., viii.

limitations of being human are thereby conveniently overlooked. Hence, I propose that it is highly presumptuous to justify conservative religion simply because it produces flocks of zealous adherents.

Observing a contrasting trend, Kelley complains that "we are living in a day when strictness is out of favor."¹² This trend is indeed widespread, and, given Kelley's definition of strictness, with good reason. For while it is true that many today seek security and certainty in religion, many others refuse to project an assurance they do not feel. They would rather be honest about the impossibility of final knowledge on most important subjects than to select some viewpoint and insist that it is correct. They find it irksome and unintelligent for some people to claim that they have unimpeachable answers for everything.

This posture does not mean that the former have no opinions about such matters or no interest in them or that they lack commitment of any sort. It does not mean that they believe any view to be as good as any other. It does mean that they are interested in sharing their views and informing themselves among other people rather than insisting that those with differing views are in all cases simply wrong.

Kelley draws what I think is a seriously misleading

¹²Ibid., 175.

and unfortunate distinction between the possibility for finding meaning in human life and engagement in cooperative (Kelley says, diluting) religious enterprises of any sort. Such efforts, for example, of "ecumenical" churches to amalgamate or otherwise cooperate are all "symptoms and confirmations of the process of relaxation [which] may be conducive to brotherhood, peace, justice, freedom, and compassion, but [which is] not conducive to conserving . . . the efficacy of . . . ultimate meanings."¹³ These values have nothing to do with ultimate meanings? I daresay I should hope otherwise. If religion can proceed without reference to these matters, this project is a complete waste of time.

Peter Berger provides a contrasting analysis in his newest book. He notices that in premodern times the knowledge and capabilities of human beings were such that there was little opportunity for challenging traditional authority. "Sociologically speaking, premodern societies are marked by the fact that their institutions have a very high degree of taken-for-granted certainty."¹⁴ It is now the case, however, that for a large part of the human race life has changed radically from being dominated by fate to being

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979), 13.

dominated by choice.

As more and more choices are exercised, pluralization develops to the point that it is progressively more difficult to rely upon the social structure for authority in action and thought. "The taken-for-granted manner in which premodern institutions ordered human life has eroded. What previously was self-evident fact now becomes an occasion to choose."¹⁵ These choices are not only possibilities but increasingly are requirements as people are bombarded with disparate ways of dealing with reality.

This change in status affects religion as well. "The typical premodern society creates conditions under which religion has, for the individual, the quality of objective certainty; modern society, by contrast, undermines this certainty, deobjectivates it by robbing it of its taken-for-granted status."¹⁶ Berger points out that in the past the authority of religious tradition was such that its rejection was much less common than in the present. Those who rejected this authority were said to be guilty of "heresy," the root of which comes from a Greek verb meaning "to choose." Berger argues that "for premodern man, heresy is a possibility--usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity. Or again, modernity creates a new situation in which picking and

¹⁵Ibid., 22.

¹⁶Ibid., 26.

choosing becomes an imperative" (his italics).¹⁷

The background of traditional religious authority has become dim or even disappeared. As long as that background was still there, individuals had the possibility of not picking and choosing--they could simply surrender to the taken-for-granted consensus that surrounded them on all sides, and that is what most individuals did. But now this possibility itself becomes dim or disappears: How can one surrender to a consensus that is socially unavailable? Any affirmation must first create the consensus, even if this can only be done in some small quasi-sectarian community. In other words, individuals now must pick and choose. Having done so, it is very difficult to forget the fact. There remains the memory of the deliberate construction of a community of consent, and with this a haunting sense of the constructedness of that which the community affirms. Inevitably, the affirmations will be fragile and this fragility will not be very far from consciousness (Berger's italics).¹⁸

If this analysis is accurate, it would not seem appropriate to attempt to erase the memory of such choices by constructing religious communities which require unquestioning commitment to particular views, nor would persons be well advised to lose themselves in such organizations.

This project consists in part of the writing of a document intended to contribute to the development of a posture which holds that Christians should not be afraid to ask questions about their beliefs and which encourages persons of widely differing persuasions to participate in this sort of examination. This document is introduced and discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁷Ibid., 28.

¹⁸Ibid., 28-29.

II. THE PROJECT DOCUMENT AND METHOD

Part Two contains a composition which attempts to raise for its readers some of the kinds of questions which scholars in such fields as theology, Biblical studies, and ethics have been considering. It is directed to non-specialists in these fields and hence avoids the technical terminology of these disciplines. The composition is not intended to be a systematic report of the work of assorted scholars nor does it delve into their discussion of myriad finer points. Rather, the structure of the composition is one of an overview of a number of topics which seem to me to be important.

I have described the composition as being written in "lay language." I intend the term "lay" to be taken in its most general sense: I do not write only for members of churches nor even only for Christians. The composition does assume that its readers have knowledge of how at least some Christians have approached the subjects it treats. In various readers this knowledge may result in what might be characterized as either a sympathetic interest in or an unappreciative aversion to the content of the knowledge. Thus the composition does not assume that its readers hold a particular viewpoint on any of the subjects it discusses.

In regard to the style of writing, "lay language" certainly means avoiding a technical vocabulary. But it

ought not to mean a barren, pseudo-scholarly prose which has merely been stripped of unfamiliar terms, nor ought it to mean literary reductionism whose aim is so broad that significant ideas are reduced to trivia. The composition attempts to maintain a level of some literary quality and at the same time to avoid a ponderous tone by relying on an approach which is purposely somewhat provocative.

I have described the composition as being a "reflection" on modern scholarship since it is not a report or in any sense an exhaustive summary of the diverse views of different scholars. I have selected questions which are personally important to me and which I think are of considerable interest to many other people. I have also included some ways of responding to the questions which are raised. The selection of both the questions and the responses reflects my own views and perceptions about these matters in a way that would not be the case if I were merely surveying scholarly positions. By presenting what I regard as important scholarly work in a somewhat less personally detached way than an historical account of such scholarship would probably be, my hope is that readers of the composition might more fully and easily appreciate their value.

The essay provides an overview which deals with a number of interrelated problems. It begins with an introduction which explains the purpose of the composition and which mentions briefly some of the problems discussed in the

preceding chapter on the background of the project. The body of the composition then contains sections on the Bible, God, evil and the power of God, providence and prayer, Jesus, and sin and salvation, followed by some concluding remarks.

Each of the these topics in already a wide area for inquiry. The composition could easily deal with any one of them alone. It could not, however, in that case deal adequately with the numerous related and vital questions which would invariably arise, a problem which has previously been mentioned. One important goal of the composition is to sketch in broad outline questions and responses which might aid the formation of a coherent perspective regarding these subjects. In this respect the composition is very much open-ended, and purposely so. It tries to avoid the implication that complex questions can be neatly answered with finality and certainty and to suggest that approaches to religious belief which claim that this is possible are illusions.

I have already mentioned that the essay does not assume its readers hold a common viewpoint on any subject. It makes a genuine attempt to address persons both in and out of the Church, and persons both Christian and non-Christian, regardless of their relationship to the Church. Partly as a result of this orientation (although partly as well for the sheer impact of the writing), the essay is

written in a style which some readers may regard as rather blunt. Some of them may be offended and put off by this characteristic. While I have not intended to offend them, I believe there is value in approaching these questions with as little pretense and preconception as possible.

Thus the composition is directed to those inside the Church, who need to confront themselves with the sorts of questions raised and who often get little assistance in doing so. It is directed as well to those outside the Church, who may have found much of the Church's vision of the world to be confusion and fantasy and who do not detect much interest within the Church toward considering these problems.

Actually, I believe it would be accurate to observe that there may well be more common interest in such questions than persons in either group are apt to realize. Individual church members may be troubled by questions which they are reluctant to raise unless they are encouraged to do so. In the absence of a sufficiently open atmosphere, such questioning is likely to seem too threatening. If church members raise these matters with other members, they may fear appearing uncommitted or foolish. If they raise them with the pastor or other professionals, these leaders may hesitate to deal with them in complete honesty for fear of disturbing the faith of their parishioners or of appearing to sanction too critical a posture as word of such views circulates within the congregation.

Persons outside the Church may have many of the same questions which are bothering those inside. But if church members are unable to deal openly with these concerns even among their own ranks, there is little chance that non-members will learn of the similarities between them. Non-Christians may thus continue to perceive churches largely as groups of deluded zealots or at best innocuous dullards.

The composition in Part Two intends to counteract this unfortunate impasse by insisting that critical, honest, and inclusive evaluation of belief is no foreign enemy of mature religion, Dean Kelley's low estimate of such dialogue notwithstanding.

There are numerous possible approaches to doing the kind of writing which the composition contains. What I have written could have been organized in any number of other ways and could have treated any number of other subjects. I have discussed questions which seem to me to be pivotal and which I believe are not widely enough aired. I have tried to offer assistance in considering these sorts of questions because I think this assistance has been insufficiently available.

The composition is not, however, limited to the raising of questions. In most cases I have as well offered responses to the questions which have been raised. I do not intend these responses to be regarded as what I take to be complete or final judgments on these matters. Rather, I

hope that the responses will contribute to readers' refinement of their own grappling with the questions. Although I have stated my own responses rather boldly in some cases, I do not mean by this to imply that they are necessarily correct, but instead to encourage readers to reach their own conclusions.

The limitations of any particular attempt to deal with such a broad range of topics must always be borne in mind. But the kind of overview I have prepared will have succeeded if it stirs in those who might read it an attitude of critical and constructive inquiry which may previously have seemed, depending upon their earlier estimates of Christianity, inappropriate, distressing, or useless.

The approach the composition takes is likely to be rather different from most other kinds of materials written for nonspecialists in this area. It attempts, for instance, to deal explicitly with a number of theological assumptions and concepts, yet without becoming involved in complicated technical discussions. It raises key theological issues directly, even bluntly. It is less apologetic than might be expected of material, for instance, intended strictly for lay consumption in churches. In this respect, it is less worried about whether readers may find the material upsetting or disturbing. Instead, it is more interested in being honest about the difficulties involved in dealing with the kinds of ultimate questions religion treats even if this

approach is less psychologically satisfying or comfortable.

This difference in approach can be illustrated by reference to several items appearing within the tradition of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the denomination with which I am most familiar. Three books, for instance, in the adult education portion of the Christian Life Curriculum, used in many Disciple churches during the 1970's, can serve as examples of church school materials.¹⁹ In dealing with theological issues these publications tend to exhibit a constriction of perspective illustrated by such a statement as the following:

Absolutely central to the gospel is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All the writings of the New Testament unite in testifying to the reality and to the centrality of the Resurrection. The church is built upon it and cannot be explained or understood apart from its conviction that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God.²⁰

Adams uses an approach which is somewhat closer to that of the project document in that each chapter of the book begins with a list of issues, stated in the form of questions, which are dealt with in that chapter. But, while

¹⁹Harry Baker Adams, God Confronts Man (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1969); Richard Pope, The Man Who Responds (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1969); Edwin L. Becker, Responding to God's Call (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1969). Although published by the Disciples publishing house, the books in this curriculum series were developed in cooperation with the American Baptist Church, the Church of the Brethren, and the Church of God.

²⁰Pope, 71.

there is less of a sense of restriction in this book than in the others, there is projected the impression that the author is treading rather carefully in order to avoid making theological statements which might offend some readers.

Three other useful examples are books written or edited by prominent Disciples which would be suitable for lay persons and in which one might expect to encounter rather explicit and detailed theological discussions since all of these books are directed to the subject of the beliefs of Disciples.²¹ While these writers are less reluctant to express views to which some might object, neither do they provide any very systematically theological analysis or discussion. This is not to say that these books or the previously mentioned curricular materials are completely lacking in value or that they have nothing important to say. At the same time, although I am sure that the writers of all of these books have been exposed to the perspectives which modern scholarship offers, I seriously doubt that these works successfully transmit to their nonspecialist audiences the most significant insights of these perspectives.

I am therefore convinced that a fresh approach is

²¹Ronald E. Osborn, The Faith We Affirm: Basic Beliefs of Disciples of Christ (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1979); Kenneth L. Teegarden, We Call Ourselves Disciples (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975); James C. Suggs (ed.), This We Believe (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1977).

needed. Traditional beliefs are becoming more and more questionable to many modern people, a situation which Peter Berger suggests is only to be expected. An approach is called for which recognizes these problems and which clearly explains exactly what the problems are. People must be encouraged and helped to think about these problems themselves rather than to accept blindly the pronouncement of this or that authority figure. The project document attempts to assist its readers in beginning this process of critical thought.

In order to provide some means of assessing how well the document accomplishes its purposes, I have arranged for it to be read and evaluated by three people who are not specialists in the fields involved. I have encouraged these readers to react and respond to the composition in any way they see fit. I have asked that they include in their responses some reference to a few matters contained in a short Guide for Respondents which I have prepared. Part Three of this project consists of a brief analysis of the responses these readers have given. A copy of the Guide for Respondents as well as the responses themselves appear in the Appendix.

PART TWO

THE PROJECT DOCUMENT

I. INTRODUCTION

The world of the late twentieth century is one of incredible complexity and vast diversity. Billions of people inhabit the planet Earth, each with their own abilities and needs, their own joys and sorrows, their own outlooks and understandings about life. Among the many influences which shape their lives are a variety of religious perspectives.

Different cultures are dominated by particular religious traditions. These traditions affect all the members of these cultures, regardless of how individual people react to the claims of the dominant tradition. Some may embrace a given form of the tradition wholeheartedly. Others may reject it outright or largely ignore it. Still others may be at the same time attracted and repelled by different aspects of the tradition.

It is not otherwise with Christianity. One person may read the Bible as God's direct message to humanity. She may accept the claims of some Christians that God promises many special things to Christian believers. She wonders why everyone does not see the rightness of these understandings. Probably, she may think, it is because they are sinners, committing many acts against the laws of God as recorded in the Bible. If only they would repent, they could join the community of faithful believers and share in the joy of

knowing that they are saved.

Another person may doubt that such a God as these Christians proclaim even exists. Jesus lived a long time ago. No one knows much about him. Lots of things church people say just don't make any sense. Quoting the Bible doesn't help. And what about other religions? Who is God really, and how can anyone prove the existence of God anyway?

Someone else may be a lifelong Christian who attends church regularly and who believes that Christianity offers him something he cannot find elsewhere. But sometimes he is troubled by questions for which he can find no good answers. When he reads the Bible, there are parts that he cannot understand. Some of his closest Christian friends have suffered terribly, and he is at a loss to know why. His prayers have often gone unanswered. Although the minister preaches many inspiring sermons, most them do not help very much in resolving these conflicts. Perhaps, the man thinks, he has not tried hard enough to be a good Christian. Surely Christians are not meant to experience these uncertainties. The best thing to do, he may decide, is just to keep trying. But his uneasiness does not go away.

To all of these people I address what I have written here--to them and to those anywhere in between. The sorts of questions which have been mentioned above clearly do not receive the amount of attention within the Church which

interest in them would seem to warrant. Theologians, philosophers of religion, Biblical scholars, ethicists, and others have contributed a great deal to these areas in recent years. Persons, however, who do not have occasion to study these fields, both inside and outside the Church, are not apt to hear very much about these contributions, or when they do, it is usually in bits and pieces.

This composition is born in part out of a certain anger that those in the Church who ought to know better--in particular, members of the clergy--have been lax in fostering serious consideration of these matters. In many cases they even participate in perpetuating the very problems which trouble their parishioners and in lending their authority to shore up beliefs which their own study should have shown to be inadequate.

At the same time, I recognize that it is difficult to bring new insights to bear within highly traditional contexts such as the Church. Thus the clergy are not entirely to blame for the difficulties they face in this regard. Moreover, because they work with congregations whose membership changes constantly as people come and go, any educational effort becomes harder.

An equally challenging hurdle is the manner in which questions of this sort overlap each other and involve assumptions which go far beyond themselves. They are not easily divided into small, separate packages which lend

themselves to treatment within the standard educational opportunities found in churches. One risk is that unless people can somehow participate in reasonably comprehensive study they may end up more frustrated than assisted. To encounter disturbing new ideas in piecemeal fashion is apt either to hasten the disintegration of an already tenuous faith or to reinforce the attachment to familiar but problematic beliefs.

In view of these circumstances it is understandable, though nonetheless regrettable, if clergy and other church educational leaders are reluctant to tackle these issues. I have here begun a very modest attempt to address this situation. What I have written is not a summary, in the usual sense, of modern scholarship. It does not refer to specific scholars, nor does it report on particular scholarly projects or debates among various schools of thought. I have called it rather a reflection on modern scholarship because it includes my own perceptions and judgments in a way that would not be basically true of a summary or report.

Because this composition is directed to the non-specialist in these fields, persons both inside and outside the Church, I have specifically sought to avoid the use of the kinds of technical terminology which scholars often use. Thus I have described the reflection as being written in lay language. I do not mean by this, however, a writing style which eschews words longer than two syllables nor one which

treats complex ideas as if they are easily reduced to simple ones.

I do not suggest that the ideas I present are my own, although there may not be a single scholar, past or present, who would agree with everything I have written. If there is any originality in this essay, it lies in the kind of overview which is offered, connecting a number of topics in a way that is perhaps not commonly done. I believe this approach is essential for these topics because one cannot be adequately understood without addressing the others.

Yet, because this writing does consider a rather broad range of topics in a relatively short space, there is always the danger that some matters have been made to appear more simple than they are. Although I have tried to avoid this difficulty, readers are asked to keep in mind that scholars have treated many more detailed questions than I am able to refer to here.

In the course of this writing I have raised a great many questions. That, in fact, is its major purpose--to assist readers in raising these questions for themselves. Many of the questions are very difficult and the answers uncertain. I propose that we need to be very honest about this uncertainty and to examine assumptions which allow us to maintain a false sense of certainty. If Christianity presumes to speak about truth, it cannot fail to submit its

claims to open and honest evaluation.

Where I have attempted to provide some answers to the questions I have raised, I regard what I have written as tentative and suggestive rather than as definitive and final. For readers to consider seriously the questions I have raised is much more important than for them to accept the answers I have proposed.

I should say that some readers may find the questions I have asked to be outrageous, shocking, or even offensive. This may be true as well of suggested answers and the general tone of the writing. While I have not purposely written so as to produce these results, neither have I gone to great trouble to couch these issues in terms designed least to upset persons of certain persuasions. It has not been my intention purposely to shock them. If the result is that they are shocked, I apologize. I do not apologize, however, for raising the issues I have raised directly and forthrightly, for I am not interested in writing a subtly constructed apologetic for certain traditional views with which I have little sympathy.

II. THE BIBLE

The Bible: what is it, how did it come into existence, and how ought it to be used? One consensus commonly found in Christian circles is that the answers to these questions are obvious. The Bible is the Word of God, which God has caused to be written down for specific and complete appropriation by humankind. No further comment on these matters is required nor acceptable.

To raise any questions about these answers or the assumptions behind them either does not occur to those who espouse them or is seen as too threatening or irreligious. Yet, quite apart from the inherent complications of the program for which these answers call, the web of contradiction which underlies them demands to be exposed, and different answers are required.

The Bible consists of collections of materials written down by various persons at various times. Some of this material was passed along orally from generation to generation before it was written down. Other parts were written down directly by the persons with whom they originated.

The materials were copied and recopied by different people, who sometimes edited them in various ways. Some of this editing was relatively insignificant. In other instances the result of this editing was more substantive.

Sometimes mistakes occurred in the laborious hand-copying process. In no case do original copies of these documents survive to this day. The copies which do survive are not identical to one another.

Materials exist which are similar to those in the Bible but which are not included in it. The early Church was instrumental in deciding which materials would be included and which would not.

The copies of the Bible which most people today read are translations of ancient languages. The languages reflect unfamiliar ancient cultures very different from modern cultures. Translations alone cannot cut through these differences.

The materials in the Bible exhibit different viewpoints on some subjects which reflect the differing assumptions of the writers and which may not be easily reconciled with each other.

In view of these circumstances it is surely proper to consider the sense in which the Bible can be understood as the Word of God. To begin with, there is simply no way of maintaining that a document which has come to us by the process just described is the infallible, direct expression of God which some persons insist upon.

Others, recognizing that the material in the Bible was, after all, written by people, propose that these writers were "inspired" by God. If, however, the point

of this shift is nonetheless to retain the idea of the Bible as an infallible divine expression, most of the same problems remain.

Honesty simply requires that we give up the notion of the Bible as a document which is a literally perfect communication from God. Nor will it do to suggest that the Bible is in part inspired although perhaps partly not so since there is no way of knowing which part is which.

There are those who would maintain that unless, at whatever cost, the Bible can be viewed literally as the Word of God, we might as well forget about the whole thing. That, however, is far from being the case.

Among other things, the Bible is a report of a people's experience with God, of their response to that experience, and of their understanding of it. The report extends both before and after the birth of one member of that people--Jesus--whose life and its effect upon their experience is reported upon extensively.

The Bible is, in fact, the most important reflection we have about these experiences and their meaning. In this respect it is a very human document. Yet it could be described as the Word of God in the sense that it is word about God. But it is also about response to God--human response, incomplete in many ways and lacking full understanding.

If the Bible is seen in this way, there is no reason

to insist that it is infallible. To the contrary, there is reason to insist that it most definitely is not infallible. If we ourselves were to participate in a period of history during which such an event as the life of Jesus were to occur, we cannot expect that we would be able to understand fully the implications.

It is therefore unrealistic to think that persons in another period of history would be different in this respect. Furthermore, persons arrive at differing understandings of the same event based upon the different perspectives from which they view them. The Bible as well reflects this reality.

To treat the Bible as an infallible document and to use it as if it were such in debates over a host of topics has been all too common in the past. Unfortunately this practice continues today. But if the Bible is a human expression, why should it be thought that any part of it is absolutely or necessarily correct? To do so is to assign to its writers capability and wisdom in a completely unrealistic way. It is also to imply that no one after these writers could entertain a valid insight if it happens to differ from the contents of the Bible.

This is not to support the opposite mistake of presuming the Bible to be incorrect. But it is to call for taking about of the kind of reflection on what the Bible is in itself which has been suggested above.

In addition to what the Bible tells us about the religious experience of the Hebrew people and others with whom they lived, it contains a rich tradition of story and illustration which has meant a great deal to its readers throughout nearly two thousand years. The Bible is prized literature, speaking about puzzles of the human condition which have intrigued people at least since the dawn of written history. Christians and non-Christians alike have appreciated its poetry and its parable, its allegory and its wisdom. It is important to recognize that in this respect the value of the Bible, as with other significant literature, does not depend upon its being an accurate account of actual events.

If the Bible is valuable as literature in its own right, questions of its literal accuracy aside, it nonetheless remains important to know what the Biblical writers believed about the various topics on which they wrote. Knowing what they wrote, however, means more than merely reading what they wrote. It involves understanding such things as the structure of the main and subordinate points of various sections of Scripture, the literary forms in which the ideas are expressed, and the cultural and historical background of both the writer and the writing.

These are usually not apparent to the casual reader, nor even to the serious reader who is not trained or otherwise assisted in these approaches. Such a procedure can

help to reveal more clearly the assumptions of a writer, which ought to have a bearing upon how seriously the writer's ideas are to be taken. For if it is important to know what Biblical writers have written, it is equally important to evaluate the validity of what they have written.

Ought not readers of the Bible at least to consider the possibility that Biblical writers have propounded ideas on various topics which are essentially mistaken? It is not the purpose of this chapter to open a discussion on the merits of particular passages but rather to suggest that a critical frame of mind is essential to the proper use of the Bible.

Users of the Bible do no service to God, to the Church, or to fellow human beings in championing a simplistic and rigid commitment to an inerrant Bible which violates the very truth they presume to announce. The result is apt to be that the most valuable contributions of the Bible to human life are cheapened and overshadowed by false claims of its total reliability.

III. GOD

This chapter raises a number of questions about ideas of God. Persons both in and out of the church, Christian and non-Christian alike, often assume that they know what is meant by the word God. One widespread conception portrays God as a heavenly father, with many of the attributes of a good human father, as well as superhuman capabilities. Another might stress God as a powerful cosmic ruler at whose command any conceivable action will occur.

If we are honest, however, we must admit the extreme difficulty of describing who or what God is. Even beyond developing a description of God lies the question as to whether such a described entity actually exists. Merely formulating a description which one calls "God" in no way demonstrates the reality of such a God.

These are not the sorts of questions which many Christians have occasion to consider seriously. To do so is apt to be seen as un-Christian, unnecessary, or, at best, rather odd. Christianity, after all, already offers, through its Scripture, its doctrine, and its tradition, particular visions of God. If one does not accept these visions, one ought simply, it might be suggested, to reject Christianity.

Yet if Christians are concerned with the truth of their visions of God, they cannot merely assume that one or

another of the ideas they encounter in their tradition is valid and that other views are invalid. They cannot blindly insist, for instance, that the powerful visions which have touched the lives of millions of persons in the world's other great religious traditions are mistaken and worthless. At the very least, Christians ought to recognize that there is no possibility of proving the truth of any view of God and that such ideas best remain subject to critical examination.

This kind of examination ought never to be seen as a sign of faithlessness. Christians are often indisposed to consider such matters, whether out of fear of threatening their sense of religious security or out of sheer unawareness of the need for and value in doing so. In either case it is just such theological inertia which repels many non-Christians and even some Christians who find churches and other assorted Christian organizations reinforcing this tendency.

Perhaps the single most common conception of God which comes to the minds of many people is that of God as Creator of the world. Often this view involves a sense of the world and all that is in it as having been originally created very much as they are today. The story of creation in the Bible reinforces this sense, even specifying that the entirety of creation was accomplished during a period of only seven days.

But such an account of how the world came to be as it is now simply does not correspond with any of the knowledge about natural processes which we have accumulated over several centuries. Rather, the picture of the world which has emerged is one of development and change over billions of years. We know, for instance, that many of the forms of life which now exist are relatively late developments in the history of the planet Earth.

This picture suggests that it is inappropriate to regard God as Creator of the world if by this we mean that God simply decided one day to bring into existence the sort of world with which we are familiar today, causing planets, people, dogs, trees, and rocks suddenly to appear where they had not been before. We do not, of course, understand precisely how or why our particular world has come to exist as it does. However, we have gained some understanding of the processes involved as a result of the study of such fields, for example, as genetics.

It is clear that to think of creation as the work of a cosmic magician, who presumably performs other equally surprising tricks, is not a helpful way of conceiving of God.

A number of other conceptions of God have also found wide acceptance within Christian tradition itself and its popularization in Western cultures. Yet these views exhibit substantial incompatibility with one another, a situation

which apparently escapes the attention of those who fail, for whatever reason, to examine them. Although the views overlap in various ways, each emphasizes a particular notion which may or may not accord with the dominant emphases of other views.

For instance, God is variously described as all-powerful controller of the universe, as loving heavenly father, or as forever unchanging universal lawgiver, to mention three possibilities in a lengthy list. So long as these conceptions are treated one at a time, there may seem to be compelling reasons to affirm them. However, when an attempt is made to apply them simultaneously to the same God, difficulties arise.

How, for instance, if God controls all that happens in the universe and is at the same time a loving heavenly father, can such evils as war, crime, and starving masses be explained? Or how can it be said that the love of God means anything if the response to it, or lack of response, by human beings in any case leaves God forever unchanged? Or what is the sense of proclaiming God's laws for human life if God already controls the outcome of events anyway?

A common response to questions of this sort and many others involving religious topics is to argue that the answers lie in mysteries of the universe far too deep for human understanding. We are not meant to know these things. Yet if this is so and if Christianity claims to preach

truth, how can it do so if the truth is beyond understanding?

Either Christians must address such questions directly or their faith is set adrift in a fantasy world and shaped by little else than a fabricated sense of security and a quest for personal ecstasy. In dealing with such questions, the possibility needs to be considered that not all of these traditional views of God are valid.

It is surely a centralmost claim of Christianity that God's nature is that of love. Jesus proclaimed above all else this aspect of God, whom he named as the source of love in human life and throughout the universe. This love is no mere sentimentality but a deep caring for and concern about the lives of others. It is a love which has place for the freedom of others--a genuine freedom for good or ill: to give love or withhold it, to receive love or reject it, to accept opportunities for improvement or to ignore them, to appreciate beauty or to destroy it, to live life fully or to squander it away.

Whether or not this God is all-powerful, any use of power evidently does not include controlling human beings or forcing them to act in certain ways. Yet, does not God's love seek to influence persons in some way? Would it not wish to persuade them to adopt such positive modes of life as those mentioned above? Would it not covet for them that quality of experience and lure them toward it, but without

hint of coercion, lest it be not fully theirs? And as for being forever unchanging, how could such a God be thus?

That God could not be impervious to the effect of persuasive love, rejoicing in its acceptance, grieving at its rebuff. Though the character of that God remain constant, the being and experience never could.

I do not mention the latter views because I imagine that all difficulties in speaking about God are swept away upon their adoption. Despite their potential attractiveness, they are not self-validating truths which demonstrate the existence of the God they describe. Yet with respect to an understanding of God which can genuinely be called Christian, they are at the same time true to the most important claim of Christian proclamation about God and free of many of the kinds of irresolvable predicaments which have been mentioned above. It is little wonder that thoughtful persons are apt to reject Christianity when they perceive its vision of God as a jumble of contradictory ideas which persist mainly because Christians are afraid to examine them.

IV. EVIL AND THE POWER OF GOD

Chapter III referred briefly to the question of evil in the world and the power of God in relation to it. Assumptions are made about God which lead to difficulties in explaining the existence and persistence of evil. Different sets of assumptions yield different conclusions, each of which seems somehow unsatisfactory.

Some of these scenarios go like this. God is the one all-powerful being in the universe and is therefore responsible for everything that happens. But some of the things that happen are decidedly evil. Therefore, God must be an evil being. Or, perhaps, although God is all-powerful, that does not necessarily imply responsibility for everything that happens. But if God has the power to prevent evil and does not, God is still an evil being. Or take the assumption that God is a loving being. God could not be such a being and yet be responsible for evil. Therefore, God must not be all-powerful or else would prevent evil.

Sometimes Christians simply try to avoid facing these dilemmas. If, as we have seen, various traditional assumptions about God can somehow be kept from impinging upon one another, they can remain intact, and everything will be all right. If people would just stop asking so many questions about these matters, things would not get so

mixed up!

Besides that, maybe what we call "evil" is not really so bad in the long-run scheme of things. God is in control, and what seems very bad to us is just due to our limited perspective. But, for many thoughtful people, this head-in-the-sand approach is unsatisfying and deeply disturbing as well.

For it is impossible to explain such a horrible spectacle as the Nazi murder of millions of Jews into insignificance. Evil in the world is as real as its opposite. It cannot be ignored. If Christian understanding is unable to make sense of its existence, then Christianity is seriously flawed.

But why do we seem so anxious to make God responsible for the evil we see around us? Perhaps, more than we wish to admit, it is because we prefer not to accept any responsibility for it ourselves. It seems, however, that we do in fact have the freedom to contribute to evil results or to pursue other courses of action.

Some have argued that human freedom is merely something we imagine and that our actions are really controlled by forces of various kinds beyond ourselves. Yet this does not seem to be accurate. We have a definite sense of our ability to make decisions about what we will do. We are aware that at a given moment we are as yet unsure about which of a number of alternatives we will select in the

future in relation to some situation. Although decisions are affected by factors beyond our direct and immediate control, such as what we perceive about other people, what we have done in the past, and what we know or do not know, there is yet real decision--unpredictability and novelty--in assimilating these influences and bringing into existence an actuality which had previously been only one possibility among many.

This picture is compatible with what has been suggested as the most fully Christian view of God, one in which persuasive love lures persons toward fulfillment and away from evil, yet offers no guarantee of the outcome of any situation because persons make their own decisions about what they will do and what they will become.

If this is so, to complain that God is evil because evil occurs or that God is effectively powerless for the same reason is fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of reality. If some people decide to murder millions of their compatriots and have the power to do so, God will not stop them. If the people of the world arrange their political and economic affairs so that some of them have far more food than they need while others starve to death, God will not cause the stomachs of the dying to be filled despite these arrangements. If some of the world's people burn up its energy resources in wasteful abandon and extravagant pleasure, God will not accept the expired planet in trade on a

new one. If some people ask for money on the pretext that God will grant special favors to contributors, God will not pluck these liars from the face of the earth.

Human freedom clearly contributes to the evil we experience. This is not to say, however, that human beings are responsible for all that we often perceive as evil. A friend of mine recently underwent surgery for cancer of the brain. To his knowledge prior to the surgery, he was in the peak of health. Thus the diagnosis of cancer came as a particularly severe shock to him. The outcome of the surgery was virtually the best that could have been imagined. He suffered no paralysis or other permanent impairment as a result.

In order to reduce the risk of the cancer's return, he underwent radiation therapy, which did cause the loss of all his hair. Still there is no guarantee that the cancer has been eliminated and no way of knowing whether it is returning, short of nerve-wracking annual brain scan tests.

Certainly this is an evil experience and a burden for him to carry. The question is always why. His own answer is the further question, "What have I done to deserve this? Why has God done this to me?"

This experience illustrates graphically the pervasiveness of the link that is made between God and evil. If there is evil, God has done it. It is unfortunate how quickly this conclusion is drawn, even by Christians. My

friend believes himself to be informed by a Christian vision of reality. Yet he is very honestly and painfully at a loss to understand the situation in which he finds himself.

Even if my friend could think of something he has done which could explain his tragedy in the terms he sought, there remains a still more perplexing question. He expresses utter inability to understand how God could cause or allow the suffering of someone totally innocent such as a very young child.

I do not suggest that there is a magically comforting explanation, one which will take away the pain of those who suffer and the anguish of those close to them. But it is of considerable help if we are able to realize that there are other reasons for these events than that God singles out some persons for retribution or visits misfortune upon them out of sheer malice.

We exist in a vast world, of which human life is but a small part. There are porcupines and hurricanes, viruses and pebbles, radioactive elements and peaceful lakes--an endless array of natural realities. Countless millions of them pass in and out of existence. Though side by side, all are in conflict with other forms for continuing existence.

These natural processes, human life included, have their own particular modes of actuality, of being what they are. On numerous occasions, human beings experience these

other modes in distinctly harmful ways. People become sick; they drown; they are buried in avalanches of snow. But clearly these events do not occur as a result of God's purposeful action or callous indifference.

Just as God does not control what people do, neither does God alter the course of other natural processes in the world by exerting odd or special forces upon them from time to time. Just as it is inappropriate to blame God for the evil results of human action, it is equally senseless and confusing to blame God for the results of nonhuman events which affect us adversely.

V. PROVIDENCE AND PRAYER

The providence of God is a subject which has come to have a considerable range of meanings regarding Christians' understanding of their relationship with God. In its narrowest sense providence suggests a kind of watchful guidance of God toward persons which is quite in harmony with a view of persuasive love as luring persons toward becoming the best that they can be, the most fulfilled and loving beings possible.

All too easily, however, this theme can expand into claims which go far beyond this purview. In this section two such versions of the providence of God are discussed and questioned.

One popular but dangerous view is actually related to the problem of evil. The idea is that if one becomes a Christian and leads a good life, God will prevent evil from touching the life of such a person. If this does not happen, it is a sign that one has not been good enough.

A couple of years ago I was involved in a potentially fatal high-speed freeway accident from which I emerged but little harmed. It was interesting and quite instructive to observe the reactions of various acquaintances as they learned of this accident and commented upon it. These comments generally fell into one of three groups.

Several people, hearing that I was using a seat and

shoulder belt at the time, remarked about its effectiveness in preventing my being thrown from the vehicle and my probable serious injury, an observation which was clearly true in that case. Others suggested that I should thank God for having spared my life. Still others allowed as how I must have been "living right" for God to have prevented my serious injury or death.

While I was, of course, supremely glad to be alive and relatively free of injury, I did not regard it as appropriate to claim either that God had unexplainably prevented my death or that my conduct had merited God's favor in doing so. Yet the idea that the providence of God manifests itself as a protective bubble over the lives of Christians seems all too common.

Another conception of divine providence has a somewhat different twist and is in many ways an even more grotesque distortion.

Some time ago during a coffee break at the newspaper where I work an editor was discussing a newswire story which had been published in that day's edition. There had been an accident involving a ski lift from which lift chairs had fallen, killing and injuring several people. One survivor was quoted as saying, "By the grace of God I am alive," or something to that effect. Mentioning this statement, the editor then asked rhetorically, "But what about those who are not alive? What about the grace of God and those who

were killed?" Some may regard questions of this sort as impertinent, presumptuous, or worse. Yet they must be raised to challenge the notion that God distributes special favors to some while denying them to others.

Some Christians openly claim that a major benefit of Christian life is precisely that God does all sorts of special favors for them which are simply unavailable to non-Christians. As for presumptuousness, this notion surely takes the prize. Moreover, it perverts the good news of God's unconditional love for all people into a crass assurance of divine partiality, turning God into a kind of cosmic rabbit's foot--and this quite in addition to its inherent irrationality.

Closely related to these understandings of providence for some people is prayer, an important method by which they can make known to God their needs and desires.

The subject of prayer is perhaps a particularly sensitive one. To raise any questions about it whatsoever is, in the view of many, to risk sacrilege of the highest order. Yet as with views of the Bible or with views of God, unquestioning commitment to unexamined assumptions only blocks the essential light of truth from shaping Christian vision.

Prayer might be most broadly defined as communication with God. Perhaps partly as a result of our esteem for freedom of expression, this communication with God is often

seen as having no particular limits as to the frame of mind or purpose of the pray-er. Yet this approach can present a number of pitfalls.

There is surely no inconsistency in using prayer as a vehicle for expressing, whether individually or corporately, our gratitude for God's unqualified love despite our shortcomings and for lifting up that which troubles us-- although it is not an uncommon perception nor a peculiar claim that God is already aware of these matters.

But when the focus of this communication shifts to a posture which variously suggests, asks, begs, or demands that God cause this or that result to occur, serious questions arise. Upon what basis might one presume that such a request would influence God to do this thing?

Does it fall under the category of divine favors, to which some Christians regard themselves as entitled? Or, perhaps, does God tally up a count of the number of requests for the action, considering it more favorably if it appears highly popular? Or is the outcome most influenced by the relative difficulty of the request? But, then again, what shall be done about conflicting requests?

These questions alone, quite without attempted answers, illustrate the myriad difficulties involved. More importantly, however, such questions pale in the face of the conflict between this entire line of inquiry and the understanding of the nature of the power of God and God's inter-

action with persons which has been developed at various points in this writing.

If God simply does not, in the final analysis, cause this person to act in a certain way or that event to occur, just what kind of game does one presume to play in imploring God to do so-and-so? When people pray in Jesus' name, as Christians often do, they ought surely, if they pray truly in Jesus' name, to consider the implications of that which they utter, lest they mock the very God to whom they pray.

VI. JESUS

Churches throughout Christian history have attempted to give concrete expression to Christian faith by the use of doctrines or teachings, particularly about Jesus. In some cases these doctrines consist of formal statements or creeds. In other cases they are much more informal and may not even be stated in any official way.

Some churches make use of considerable formal doctrine, while others have very little. Regardless, however, of the degree of formality in their particular churches most church members have fairly definite, if not homogeneous, ideas about such teachings.

As with the identity of God, Christians usually tend to think of the person of Jesus, his relationship to God, and hence his significance as something which is fairly simple to understand. Jesus is often spoken of as the Son of God, as one whose life was sacrificed to save those who will believe in him, as one who rose from the dead, and in any number of other ways. And, as with varying descriptions of God, these characterizations may or may not form a compatible and coherent image of who Jesus was and what his significance was for those around him and for us today.

According to the Bible, Jesus announced the end of the then current order of the world and the coming of "the Kingdom of God" wherein the truth and righteousness of God

would prevail. This ending of the old order was thought to be very near. Persons were admonished to pay attention to what Jesus had to say, lest they fail to participate in the coming Kingdom.

But Jesus was killed, and the new world order did not appear. Other parts of the Bible suggest that the new world order is to be understood as coming in the distant future, or at least at an unknown time, and that in another sense the Kingdom of God already exists in the hearts and minds of believers, who can individually experience the love of God in their lives.

Apparently Jesus' understanding of these matters was mistaken. On the other hand, it is possible that Bible accounts of Jesus' understanding are not very accurate. In reality, however, there is simply no way of knowing for sure how Jesus understood himself and his role or whether his understanding, whatever it was, was correct. Jesus did not write memoirs or leave other direct evidence of his thoughts.

Debates in various forms have been carried on for centuries as to how or whether Jesus should be understood as "divine"--either during his earthly life or after the end of it. Jesus is reported in the Bible as having risen from the dead, an event which is seen to demonstrate his divinity and his sonship to God.

In many respects doctrines such as these involving

Jesus have become cornerstones of Christian teaching and self-understanding. This in part explains the pressure to retain a view of the Bible as an inerrant document. For if the Bible cannot be seen as such, there is little remaining to verify the occurrence of such events as the resurrection of Jesus.

A rather surprising amount of energy in the teachings of churches is directed toward maintaining an array of doctrines about Jesus. Yet even if these notions make sense to persons twenty centuries removed from their source, it would seem that there is just no way for such persons to know whether these claims are true.

To suggest that persons ought simply to "have faith" that they are true is hardly satisfactory to anyone with an appreciation of the range of ideas which people throughout history have been asked to accept on such a basis, sometimes with shocking results.

The question ought to be considered whether such heavy reliance on these sorts of doctrines is necessary or even useful. Jesus' life and ministry, after all, were not directly primarily toward establishing himself as the center of attention. Rather, he was concerned to communicate to divided and tormented people the love of a God whose power resides not in sheer force but in the magnetic persuasiveness of that very love.

The entire New Testament is permeated with this

overriding message. The power of this love to transform human lives in such a way that its qualities can be shared among persons and thereby experienced directly--this power has been the spark which has leaped through twenty centuries of human history and has commended Christianity as a potent religious orientation.

It seems to me that much of the doctrinal emphasis discussed above competes in a most serious way with this preeminent thrust, distracting attention toward insubstantial matters and away from the central and fundamentally new insight that Jesus presented.

This problem is not limited to churches with highly formal doctrinal positions. It exists even in a denomination such as the one out of which I have come--the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)--which has exhibited a marked aversion to formal creeds and elaborate theologies, at times almost paranoid.

This denomination, like some others, has relied upon the brief so-called "Good Confession" as a means for persons to signify their having become Christians and their readiness to be admitted into church membership. This they do by repeating such a statement (with some variation) as "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God" and often the added affirmation "and I accept Him as my (personal) Lord and Saviour." Yet this is little else than a summary of many lengthier doctrinal formulae.

There is no reference whatever to the respect in which, if at all, one has realized the significance of what I have suggested to be the central meaning of Christian self-understanding. It can be argued that almost everyone who makes such a statement certainly recognizes this underlying truth. I myself, however, am not confident that this is the case.

But there is a more important question than this. What violence is done to the truth and to both present and potential Christians by the obligatory or customary affirmation of views which, whether true or not, are at best auxiliary to the motive center? What is the effect upon persons who have experienced this love, perhaps in only a small yet special way, and who wish to join with others like themselves but who are made to feel that they cannot validate their acceptance of this love or even accept it completely unless they are willing to give assent to doctrines which in no essential way bear upon their experience. If they do not find these doctrines compelling, they may think that they have missed the point of Christianity and dismiss the entire encounter.

By way of summary, what I am suggesting is that if Jesus did not propose that people make a series of affirmations about himself the guiding influence for their lives then it is a mistake to define a Christian mode of life and self-understanding in terms of doctrines about Jesus rather

than in terms of what Jesus had to say about the meaning of God's love for human life.

VII. SIN AND SALVATION

Doctrines about sin and salvation which draw upon the conceptions of Jesus discussed in the previous chapter have been widespread throughout the history of the Church. Every person, these doctrines announce, participates in sin against God by acts of commission and omission contrary to God's laws. These acts arouse God's anger and condemn their perpetrators to eternal punishment--this unless one accepts Jesus as one's Saviour.

God is seen as having sent Jesus, an only Son, into the world to be sacrificed as payment for all the sins of humanity in order that they might be saved from damnation. Acceptance of Jesus and repentance of wrongdoing guarantee this salvation. The sending of Jesus is seen as an outgrowth of God's love and a means whereby God can forgive and overlook the wickedness of those who acknowledge Jesus. Jesus has paid the price which God requires as restitution for this wrongdoing.

Many churches at various times in their histories have made these ideas primary parts of their preaching and understanding. Christianity is pictured as a kind of divine insurance policy against eternal torment.

Another doctrine has been developed to explain why it is that some people accept this salvation and others do not. It holds that God actually chooses those who are to be

saved. These people are predestined to partake of God's forgiveness. Others simply lack this divine favor.

But all of these ideas have many problems. If God's love is unconditional and unending, how can it be thought that God ever condemns even those who turn that love away? What is the sense or purpose in saying that God provides a sacrifice for God's own appeasement of human sin? Knowing no more than we do about possibilities for life in any form after physical death, what could we really mean in speaking about eternal damnation? What is the point of evangelizing potential Christians or preaching to the world if some are already chosen and the rest are left out?

Quite apart from these sorts of difficulties, these doctrines exhibit the same important problem as other doctrines involving the person of Jesus. Whether or not any of them are true, they are major distractions from the center of Christian self-understanding. To the extent that they occupy the attention of Christians, a greatly distorted vision of what Christianity offers is presented.

It is a distortion to present the central point of Christianity as revolving around something which God did two thousand years ago (sending Jesus to be sacrificed) basically to satisfy God's own need (compensating for the effect of human sin), the principal human response to which ought to be an oddly spectator-oriented recognition of this event and endless reiteration of that recognition.

To proceed then to tack on the proviso that, of course, this event has implications for human living today is to place priorities badly out of order. Once again, the centrality of God's love is relegated to some obscure corner and buried under a collection of ideas which modern people are apt to find at best irrelevant if not downright ridiculous.

A less problematic conception of sin and salvation views sin as a condition--separation from God--rather than as a series of specific acts, and salvation as the ending of this separation. In this respect it may represent an improvement to the extent that it tends to involve less emphasis upon Jesus' sacrifice as a payment to God. Insofar, however, as overcoming this separation is seen as requiring the affirmation of a group of propositions about Jesus, the same inadequacies remain.

To be sure, all of these doctrines involve ideas of love and forgiveness in some respect. The problem is that these themes are intertwined with others in a manner which is in danger of choking them off. The point is that unless people love and forgive each other, God's love is not manifested now, today, despite what may have happened two thousand years ago or what anyone professes to believe about what happened.

To participate in the salvation which persuasive love makes possible for people is to be freed from personal

selfishness and self-centeredness to a wider vision of shared human potential. It is to realize again and again that despite our failures to appropriate fully the power of this love in our lives there is yet ever new opportunity to give of ourselves in ways that we alone can do. For a world torn by insensitivity and greed, we can point the way toward values of a different sort. This salvation is no mere abstraction in some far-off future, but a continually renewed and renewing vitality which even now can endow human life with meaning and purpose.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The kinds of questions we have been raising are difficult. Often they seem even more perplexing when they are raised in isolation from each other and with insufficient reference to a broader context of interrelated factors. To show how these matters are in fact so intimately connected is a major reason this writing has dealt with so many different questions in a relatively short space.

Failure to seek a sufficiently broad vision can seriously distort one's picture of the character of Christian understanding. We have mentioned a number of assumptions which, when they remain unexamined, are apt to lead to these distortions. Often these assumptions become so central that they dominate the entire approach to Christianity and the impressions of it which non-Christians gather. In these situations the center of Christianity is made to revolve around notions which confine it to tiny cubbyholes of outlook and expression. It is worth mentioning several examples with this problem in mind.

We have previously considered the notion of Biblical infallibility. Some Christians have given this idea such a central place in their thinking that they are unable to deal realistically with many of the insights of modern thought. Much energy is devoted to maintaining this view and to condemning as evil those critical of it. In actuality, this

form of Biblicism turns the Bible into an idol which distracts attention away from far more important concerns.

A similar situation can develop in regard to Jesus himself or doctrines about him, a subject we have likewise approached in the preceding chapters. A series of claims about Jesus and a fixation upon the person of Jesus can push into the background the very sensitivities which Jesus tried to foster. Personal devotion to Jesus becomes uppermost, and another form of idolatry settles subtly in.

Another distortion can grow out of the misuse of ritual in the Church. When the performance of rituals, whether in worship or in other areas of church life, becomes the central focus of Christian activity, the expression of Christianity is forced into an artificial and severely limited form. Excessive ritualism can appear both as the formality of high church tradition and as the pseudo-spontaneity of fundamentalism. Christianity is then left without substantial relation to what is occurring in most of the world. The rich contribution which ritual can make when properly used turns rather into a comfortable and irrelevant religious pastime.

The power of love has deep impact upon the human spirit. This power can touch the depths of religious sensitivity. However, when spiritual stimulation itself and the enjoyment of spiritually uplifting experiences become the goal of religion, Christianity is again distorted. When

private ecstasy and its generation is primary, the church becomes little more than a spiritualistic amusement park.

When persons receive the love of God, the character of their lives and actions is changed. However, if the nature of this change is seen as involving primarily petty moralisms of personal habit, the meaning of love is distorted and its significance vastly diminished. To preach as if Christianity mainly means personal piety is to cut off its most promising potential contribution to human life.

There is today a disappointing proliferation--both organized churches and other assorted "ministries"--which emphasize one or another of these distortions, as well as others discussed in previous chapters. If persons respond to these claims, it is seen as a sign of the validity of these perspectives. These groups offer people "what they are looking for." In addition, the Bible can be misused to bolster a nearly endless range of such positions.

Churches which do not emphasize many of these problematic positions are seen as lacking appeal because they do not offer views into which people can put their unquestioning belief. To feel sure about what one believes is sadly more important than whether what one believes has any real basis in truth. One's psychic energy is put into the creation and maintenance of one's personal religious state.

It is not that Christianity does not involve people at a very personal and individual level. Indeed, that is

surely the only way it can involve them at all. It cannot affect groups of people if it does not first affect the people in the groups. But the full appropriation of God's love in human life requires a far broader perspective than the distortions of Christianity which have been mentioned will allow.

We live in a community which is truly more global than at any time in human history. Communication, transportation, and economic interdependence have never before so thrust us together.

The threat of starvation looms on a scale voluminous by past standards. The destruction of the very environment which supports human life proceeds with frightening speed. The depletion of energy and other resources grows exponentially. These matters can no longer remain the concern primarily of economists and academicians.

Women struggle for equality of opportunity and reward and for a consciousness and a language which do not ignore them. Racial and other minorities continue to suffer from the prejudices of the dominant culture. Nations persist in pursuing petty and selfish goals. Christians can no longer act as if sexism, racism, and nationalism have nothing to do with religion.

These concerns do not call for people to sit in their churches and wonder why God does not do something about them. Rather, these concerns, like those involving

the people with whom we live and work directly each day, require specific and individual appropriation of the power of love.

To respond to the lure that is God's love is to seek and seize opportunities for giving the talent, the knowledge, the warmth, and the caring that are the unique possibilities of each person alone, that no one else can quite duplicate. These opportunities grow out of the special combination of creativity and ineptitude, achievement and tragedy, exhilaration and pain, joy and sorrow which singularly constitutes the life of each person. These opportunities can never be eliminated by the circumstances of one's life. However limited one's abilities, however meager one's resources, however insignificant one's station, however painful one's existence, the giving of oneself can enhance the lives of others in a measure of astounding proportions--an enhancement which is not terminated even by one's death.

This love is real. It is a universal human experience. It does not require that we somehow accept an exotic, mysterious, or irrational set of religious ideas. We can see the results of its being shared and shared again, multiplied and remultiplied--results which repeatedly dumbfound us and touch the very depths of our being.

This is the power of God's love, a power which truly extends beyond human capability alone. This love is a gift. It cannot be forced upon anybody, by God or by anyone else.

It can only be recieved and then given again.

As I conclude, I want to state again that the major purpose of this writing is to raise for its readers a number of questions which they might not ordinarily consider. Although they are difficult and complex questions, they ought not to be ignored. Where I have suggested answers to these questions, I certainly regard those answers as tentative and incomplete, and it is entirely possible that any number of them are mistaken.

The important thing, however, is that readers raise these questions seriously for themselves--whether or not they find the particular responses I have offered convincing.

The raising of such questions is sometimes seen as inappropriate for "faithful" Christians. Believing and trusting signify faith, whereas questioning and doubting betray lack of faith. Sometimes irrationality and mystery are even made virtues of the life of faith: the more incredible and inexplicable a belief, the greater is one's faith in professing it.

To adopt this viewpoint, however, is to make no allowance for errors of judgment which every honest person recognizes to be a part of everyday human experience. We do ourselves and others no service by refusing to examine the content of religious faith.

A desire for certainty about the validity of our convictions is understandable. Many churches and other

Christian groups today stress the idea that uncertainty in faith is weakness in faith. They propose to offer persons religious security by stating their beliefs in unquestionable terms. Their appeal is increasing among persons who feel threatened if their faith cannot be firmly and unalterably stated. These groups can then concentrate on attacking their critics, choosing to ignore any possibility of error in their own views.

Yet part of mature faith is learning to live with uncertainty, to let it be a vehicle for developing new sensitivity and new understanding. It is learning to share with others that which moves us most deeply without insisting that they conform their views to some rigid perspective.

A strong impulse in some segments of the Christian community has been to "convert" persons to Christian faith. Too often this has meant drilling into the heads of these converts a petrified world-view which admits no possibility of alteration. Yet the enduring vision of Christian faith is that of the power of persuasive love to transform the very quality of persons' lives, not that of mental incarceration augmented by condemnation of their existing convictions.

True faith is not religious certitude, alluring though this may be. It is rather humility of mind and openness to the elusive nectar of truth.

PART THREE
PROJECT EVALUATION
AND CONCLUSION

In trying to obtain some evaluation of the project document by actual lay readers, I have not attempted an elaborate, scientifically based study involving a large number of such people. There certainly exists the possibility for doing a study of this kind, including the use of such tools as questionnaires and statistical analysis of their results. There are at least two reasons why I have not, for the purposes of this project, chosen to undertake this kind of scientific analysis.

One reason is that this method of evaluation is both theoretically and logistically complex, involving, if properly done, enormous amounts of time and resources. Indeed, such an undertaking could easily constitute a project fully unto itself. Another reason that I have selected a different method of evaluation in this project is that I wanted to obtain a kind of feedback which statistically based studies simply would not provide. Hence, I have asked the three persons who were good enough to read the project document to respond in prose rather than by means of some quantifiable device.

Although in the Guide for Respondents I provided some framework for response, I encouraged these readers to offer any sort of reaction which seemed appropriate to them. The result, I believe, has been a sensitive, interesting, and varied assortment of perspectives upon which I want to reflect briefly in this section.

The Guide for Respondents and the actual responses of the readers are contained in the Appendix. It is suggested that this material now be read before one proceeds further in this section.

Respondent 1 relates the importance of the questions raised in the composition to the fact that the institutional church has tremendous power over the lives of the people who submit to its claims. To the extent that Christians fail to examine adequately the perspectives from which they consequently view the world, there is danger that they will not give sufficient attention to the limitations of those perspectives. Respondent 1 rightly notices that this too easily leads to Christians' assuming themselves the role of God and announcing rather presumptuously to others what God wishes them to do, a posture which Respondent 1 evidently does not appreciate.

Endless discussions about what the Bible is and what it means apparently indicate to Respondent 1 that such questions as the project document raises about it are quite in order. In other words, the fact that there is obviously so little agreement about it points to the problematic nature of any taken-for-granted assumption about the Bible.

Likewise, Respondent 1's approval of the questions raised about Jesus indicates her uneasiness with the notion that Jesus is appropriately to be regarded as the Son of God in a way that is fundamentally different from that of any

other human person. She thinks that although people are bothered by the questions raised in the essay they believe that Christian doctrine does not allow for such questioning and that other people will condemn them if they express doubts about such matters. All three respondents, in fact, refer to this sort of problem. Respondent 1 finds that the composition addresses this problem by offering assurance that it is all right to ask questions and to expose one's uncertainties.

In direct connection with this topic, Respondent 2 begins by confessing his relief in reading that others have doubts like his own, but he then proceeds to reiterate Respondent 1's observation that people seem unable to share these doubts.

Respondent 2 alludes to the turmoil--which we are inclined to try to avoid--that arises when the raising of such questions rather uncomfortably juxtaposes the values we profess to hold over against those which actually find expression in our lives. Modern career building and consumerism, he suggests, effectively destroy the deeper meanings of life, and too much questioning raises our consciousness of these distortions painfully high. To be asked to consider such questions is therefore irritating.

Respondent 2 wonders why, if clergy have many doubts about traditional doctrines, there is such inertia in examining religious beliefs. In the introduction to the essay

I mentioned several possible reasons. Respondent 2 really answers his own question by reiterating some of the points which I made in this regard. He proposes that clergy simply cannot reveal their doubts because their tradition-minded church members would not react favorably and that as a matter of practical politics sleeping dogs are better left alone, the time not being right to consider such doubts.

But is the time ever "right"? How can an institution which presents itself as teaching truth justify a kind of leadership whose leaders teach doctrines they believe to be false or fool themselves into ignoring their own doubts? Whatever the benefits of the status quo, they surely do not compensate for the dishonesty required to perpetuate political tranquility. This is precisely the problem. As I have said in several places, I have no instant solutions to the problem, but I cannot agree that the best thing to do is therefore to defer the matter until some elusively suitable time in the future.

Both Respondent 2 and Respondent 3 refer to personal background and development as influencing how persons may be able to cope with approaches which would tend to change their ideas. Numerous institutions in the social milieu as well play a role. It is common knowledge that the Church has lost its place as the once preeminent shaper of consciousness. It seems to me that this is due in considerable part to its apparent lack of openness and candor with regard

to its own perspectives and its failure sufficiently to foster these attributes among its members.

These qualities deserve more attention than they have received. No one person or group can claim to have unimpeachable knowledge of the truth, as Respondent 2 illustrates. I certainly tried to steer clear of any suggestion that I regard the essay as presenting a complete picture of the truth. This is one of the main reasons I avoided the kind of summary of "what's left to believe in" which Respondent 2 wishes I had provided.

This point deserves some further elaboration. Evidently I did not offer a package of beliefs sufficiently tidy for Respondent 2's tastes. I suspect that even if I wanted to I could not accomplish a result which he would find entirely satisfying. It does seem to me that I did not merely criticize traditional views without offering any alternative ways of understanding the subjects I treated, as Respondent 2 apparently thinks. I suppose the point that needs to be mentioned in this regard is that it is not necessarily possible to replace a view which one has criticized with another approach which adherents of the first view will find equally comfortable or even directly substitutable. Moreover, knowing what is not correct does not guarantee knowing what is, much as we might wish otherwise.

Respondent 2 suggests the need for recommending methods and additional sources by which people might address

the questions raised in the essay. Of course, I quite agree with this observation. In no respect do I suggest that the essay tackles this range of issues as some independent entity which requires no supplementation nor overarching method of group implementation. In writing the composition I wanted mainly to deal with the issues themselves and purposely did not attempt to design a specific curricular proposal for its use.

Respondent 2 raises the question as to whether persons with long-held traditional beliefs can withstand a serious challenge to those beliefs such as the composition represents. This is indeed a sensitive problem. Respondent 3 thinks that many people simply could not cope with ideas of this sort because their personalities and inner needs will not allow them to entertain unsettling questions about their deepest beliefs. I can only agree with this assessment. I can hardly hope to have written something which would speak to these people and their needs.

At the same time, there may be any number of traditionally-minded people who have just not had occasion to encounter these differing perspectives in any coherent fashion and who would not necessarily be shattered by considering them. And, of course, the other side of this whole coin is the large group of persons who are repelled by Christianity in any form because of the sheer irrationality of many traditional doctrines. Why should the Church be

dominated by traditionalists whose views all but ignore the most important developments of modern consciousness and knowledge? The Church deserves better than this. It will not do to maintain that challenging traditional views must not be risked because some people will be unable to withstand the challenge.

Respondent 2 makes the valid point that there will always be different "levels of enlightenment" among persons within the Church. The essay does not assume that there is any possibility of altering this situation, nor does it suggest that all can or should "accept the same vision." Precisely the opposite point is made in its concluding paragraphs. At the same time, it seems to me difficult to argue, as Respondent 2 essentially does, that it does not much matter whether some people base their religious lives upon assumptions which turn out to be false. In any case it would appear that approaches to religion are in no danger of becoming stereotyped merely because they are based upon valid assumptions, nor would I wish at all to call for such uniformity. (I must express some puzzlement over the statement by Respondent 2, "Another might agree with your position and rely more on meditation." I am not aware of having proposed such reliance.)

I am somewhat dismayed to encounter the question in Respondent 2's conclusion, "How well would people and nations interact in the absence of shared values?", the impli-

cation apparently being that I am advocating an approach to religion which shows little interest in such values or that I believe we would be better off without whatever contributions traditional religion has made to them. Nothing could be further from my intention. In fact, I argue specifically that traditional religion has not produced enough emphasis upon the sharedness of human experience.

Respondent 3 rightly notices that I have written mainly for the educated lay reader. I do hope that the writing is not such that a reader requires a college degree to benefit from it, although it is likely that such persons may find it more useful than others. Respondent 3 thinks that the majority of church members would either find the ideas in the essay too complex or would have trouble dealing with them at a psychological level. Whether or not this assessment is entirely accurate, it is undoubtedly true that many church members would simply be unwilling to subject themselves to the kinds of challenges raised, particularly those from fundamentalist groups. I really had little serious hope of addressing such people meaningfully.

However, Respondent 3 also realizes correctly that I have written as well for persons outside the church who may well already have given some thought to these issues and who could therefore appreciate having these problems discussed. I believe there are a large number of people both in and out of the church who have at least some openness to these

subjects, and it is for them I have written. Those who would refuse to consider such questions in the context I have presented them would require a far different kind of writing, if indeed it is possible to interest them at all.

With regard to terminology in the use of the word "lure," I can well appreciate the manipulative connotation involved. The word "lure" can have a number of different connotations, but in common parlance probably the most frequent one is rather derogatory. Although I qualified "lure" with the phrase "but without hint of coercion," a more appropriate choice would have been "but without hint of manipulation." Moreover, as Respondent 3 suggests, "draw" might well be better than "lure."

Two further and related points which Respondent 3 mentions were often in my mind as I wrote the project document: the inconsistencies of the doctrines of the Church and the reluctance particularly of church members to become involved in resolving or even recognizing these inconsistencies. It is precisely the unwillingness of churches to "get into that" which causes them to be seen in an unfavorable light by those who find it unacceptable to gloss over major contradictions. If churches frown upon the raising of questions about these contradictions, such persons may well decide that they must either get out or stay out of the church if they wish to address these matters.

Respondent 3 recognizes that I have no intention of

furnishing a prescribed and completed set of understandings to replace those which I criticized. Much as I might have wished to do so, one of the main purposes of the composition is to point out that such programs are realistically impossible and that it is better to recognize this impossibility than to pretend unwarranted certainty. As Respondent 3 astutely observes, this facing up to the unknown is a trauma which many people simply cannot risk. Part of the development of modern consciousness has involved a growing awareness of the finitude of human understanding. It would appear that if the Church is to function as a facilitator for human living in the real world rather than as a distraction from it, the Church ought to attempt enabling persons to risk facing the contingencies of reality by encouraging open, honest, and ongoing evaluation of the beliefs and perspectives which it offers.

In general, judging from the comments of the respondents, the project document succeeds with respect to its major purposes. The remarks of the respondents include a number of specific observations indicating the manner in and the extent to which the document is seen as being useful.

Among these observations, the respondents judge that the essay (1) fosters an openness such that any idea can be considered, (2) legitimates the raising of any relevant questions, (3) encourages readers to develop their own

responses to the questions raised, (4) relieves anxiety that one's doubts are rare phenomena, a fear which arises from the difficulty of discussing such matters with others, (5) aids in relating religious beliefs to the other areas of life, (6) provides a direct and intimate style of address which more actively involves the reader than more formal styles, which are seen to be dispassionate, overstructured, and dull, (7) relates well the questions raised in order that inconsistencies may be more adequately exposed and examined, (8) raises questions and suggests ways of dealing with them without seeming to impose the suggested answers, and (9) offers a clarity on its topics which apparently the respondents have not commonly found and which all three of them mentioned.

These observations support the idea that it is indeed possible to present these issues for nonspecialists both in a comprehensible terminology and in an interesting format. This is not to say that such discussions will be universally received as popular and easily assimilated perspectives, and it was never the assumption of this project that this would be the case. At the same time, the writing of the project document was based upon the conviction that, whatever other problems may ensue, serious writing for nonspecialists requires that issues be discussed as clearly and directly as can be managed. It requires avoiding terminology so technical or rhetoric so subtle that

readers are unable to understand what the important questions really are or to distinguish them from lesser ones. I have thus thought it better to describe honestly issues which may prove controversial than to minimize controversy merely by clouding the issues.

Yet this approach is not free of difficulties, as the respondents have also noted. Any such direct--at times, even blunt--treatment brings with it several problems of its own. First, because it challenges the validity of traditional beliefs, it is almost necessarily irritating to persons who identify themselves strongly with these beliefs, even if such challenges are not intended to irritate them. The result may be that, according to Respondent 1, "a strong believer may find himself in a defensive position." Defending oneself then competes with developing a critical perspective. The problem here is one of separating the trait of strength of conviction from perpetual attachment to a particular set of unexamined and perhaps highly problematic beliefs.

Second, correcting false assumptions is no easy undertaking. In many respects, it is a delicate and painstaking process. Hence, one difficulty with the approach the project document takes is that it deals with many different assumptions seemingly all at once. While it does so purposely for reasons which have been discussed previously, it would be foolish to think that this method can be univer-

sally successful in changing assumptions. Professional church leaders who encounter these ideas in the course of academic training do so over an extended period, which allows for more leisurely reflection and assimilation. Such an environment, however, is not easily duplicated for non-specialists. I would suggest, though, that it is better for them to encounter these ideas in a format which may prove somewhat rich rather than for them not to encounter them at all or in a manner so diffuse as to be ineffectual.

Third, although the approach of the project document may provide a feeling of relief for persons whose doubts had been a source of considerable discomfort, it may for others be a shattering experience. For these latter people, whatever the essay can provide in the way of alternative understandings is likely to be insufficient to compensate for the sense of loss they are apt to feel. Ought one therefore even to write something which will affect some people in this way? I believe the answer still must be yes. Such an experience should not produce total and permanent mental devastation. Growth of any kind is never a painless process. Exercising one's mental capacities to deal with such a seeming crisis can produce its own unexpected rewards.

Perhaps the most helpful way of dealing with the range of difficulties which have just been mentioned would be to include as part of the project document an epilogue in which these types of problems could be explicitly recog-

nized. Acknowledging the existence of problems is, after all, an important first step to dealing with them. There would, of course, be any number of other places and ways in the document to treat these problems. The essay, in fact, already includes at several points material which is at least related to this set of concerns. Probably, however, it would be best not to attempt further to anticipate them in the existing document both since this would prove somewhat distracting and since by no means all the readers would have these difficulties. For those who do, however, a discussion of them in a separate section might well be quite useful.

I cannot, of course, hope to have written something which would be equally useful to every conceivable reader. Despite my efforts to write without assuming any particular belief structure on the part of the readers, I recognize that there is little chance of speaking to those who are either unwilling or unready to consider the questions with which I have dealt. Even so, if the commentary of the respondents is any indication, the material in the project document in large measure succeeds in constituting the sort of expression I had hoped to create.

APPENDIX

A REFLECTION ON MODERN CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP
IN LAY LANGUAGE: A GUIDE FOR RESPONDENTS

1. How useful do you think the kind of overview the essay gives is in dealing with the subjects which are treated?
2. Did the essay raise questions which you think are important? Mention any specific examples you think are either particularly vital or not very important.
3. Did the essay discuss problems which (a) have interested you personally in the past? (b) you think are troubling to many people? (c) may not have previously occurred to you or were raised in a new way by the discussion? Mention examples as you wish.
4. How well do you think the essay succeeds in responding to the questions it raises? Refer to specific questions if you wish.
5. To what extent do you think the method and style of the essay are useful in helping its readers consider seriously for themselves the questions it treats even if the readers do not find the responses in the essay particularly convincing?
6. Include any other observations or comments you may wish to make.

Respondent 1:

(1) This kind of overview is useful in this type of presentation because, to continue in lay language, it really plows the ground. Everything is exposed. No one is left in doubt. And, as a reader continues on through the pages, it is apparent any idea would be considered.

(2) Yes. When you consider how many Christians there are in the world, and the power the various churches have over them, the questions raised become extremely important.

The most significant, in my mind, is "God: What is meant by the word God?" That is important because many in the Christian world assume that role and it comes out: "God wnat's you to do thus and such."

I found the question, "The Bible: What is it?" very interesting. Possibly that has been the most widely discussed subject on earth during the past 2,000 years when you add on the clause, "and what does it mean?"

Also, I liked the questions you raise about Jesus. Yes, good Christians will say, He is the Son of God. But, Bob, so are you.

(3) Yes, some of the questions have interested me in the past, particularly your "Sin and Salvation" discussion. Virtue is its own reward. And, virtue is learned, and expressed through controlled behavior.

Close to this, the "Evil vs. Power of God" segment

has often crossed my mind. When people break natural laws, they take the consequences.

Also, Christianity teaches the doctrine of free agency, which places responsibility for actions on individuals.

I do think these questions trouble a lot of people, and in most cases they never talk about it because they want to believe Christian doctrine and if they confess their fears they are judged by their peers.

(4) The way the answers to the questions are written gives the reader the assurance it is OK to raise questions and not be condemned to eternity in the fiery furnace.

(5) After reading your answers, a real strong believer may find himself in a defensive position.

(6) You state your main purpose is "to assist readers in raising these questions for themselves." You succeed. You give the assurance that it is OK to "take the lid off" and ask away.

Respondent 2:

My first reaction is relief to know that other people share the same doubts and viewpoints that I do. Underline the word relief strongly.

Beyond college, it is my experience that religious discussion is a no-no. Out of fear of stirring up a feud or hurting someone's feelings, I rarely engage even the closest family members in such a conversation. I have arrived at this position because of experiences that indicate this is the safest course. (You will find this discussed elsewhere.)

The overview is also useful to people attracted by the deeper meanings of life, especially those who might want to reorient their lives to be in harmony with their beliefs. I wonder if most of us cover up this area of our lives between young adulthood and old age because we are involved in getting and spending. If one could talk openly to older people about this, it might offer some revealing insights for the rest of us.

Such an overview is also irritating, even jolting because it challenges long-held beliefs. I discuss this point elsewhere in my comments. Suffice it here to say that religious beliefs may be the most impervious to change.

Generally, the essay succeeds very well in responding to the questions raised. However, I do offer some reservations.

Your view is that the clergy has been lax in bringing about a reexamination of religious beliefs. It would be interesting to survey the clergy on this point. If clergymen generally agree with your views, then why the inertia? Such a revelation could become a chapter in your paper and add a broader perspective to your discussion. I believe a critique has two obligations: the first, to deal with false assumptions; the second, to point to some way out of the dilemma (this is covered elsewhere in my comments).

I really wonder if clergymen could bare their doubts about established beliefs to their congregations. Some might be receptive, but how many? To the tradition-minded churchgoer, the new views that you express border on the heretical and, at the least, appear distressing. Perhaps, the minister, like a politician, knows that the time is not right for a general reevaluation.

Correcting false assumptions, as you attempt to do, is an extremely delicate matter. Perceptions about religious beliefs are selective and perhaps more resistant to change than other beliefs. Most of the older generation supported the war in Vietnam in the early years. But after increasing bloodshed, up and down war progress, and student rioting, we changed our minds. We did it grudgingly--and not very openly. George Romney, then a candidate for president, said he was brainwashed about the war by U.S. generals, and his political ambitions were dashed for good.

It turned out he was right, and we were wrong. The generals, indeed, did misrepresent the progress of the war. We admitted it much later grudgingly.

Though a change in national sentiment slowly occurred, strong forces were at work to bring it about. They were measured in the number of deaths, the cost, the lack of progress, etc. On the other hand, religious beliefs seem to be more impervious. What are the forces one can employ to instigate change? Is criticism enough?

Elsewhere in the paper (page 45) you refer to freedom of choice as a path toward change. True thinkers, perhaps, have a real choice, but how numerous are they? Most of us can't escape our upbringing, acquired attitudes, rationalizations, and partial truths overnight. Over a span of generations, perhaps, we can.

I am reminded here about the tale from India. It deals with the question of truth. Three blindfolded men are each holding a different part of an elephant. One has the trunk in his hand and describes it as strong, flexible and mobile. The second man, holding a leg, says truth is rigid and tough. The third man is holding the tail and says that truth is wiry and flighty. Each man has a part of the truth and none has it all.

Written with clarity, the essay format is highly effective because it involves the reader much more actively than the traditional scholarly papers which tend to be too

dispassionate, too structured, and too dull.

The essay's value is that the reader feels he or she is being addressed directly and intimately. As such, it is more stimulating and provocative, accomplishing the writer's objectives much more forcefully.

A point or two about structure are in order here.

As an aid to the reader, it might be useful to sum up the main points of your discussion in a separate chapter before the conclusion. The summary would tie together your views as a whole and/or present a picture of what remains after the contradictions and false assumptions of religion are pruned away. (The conclusion might then, additionally, discuss how viable the new truths are.)

I think the summary would build a better bridge between your discussion chapters and the leap to the conclusions. With the present construction of separate chapters followed by the conclusion, I felt momentarily lost.

Some summary material is already part of the conclusion chapter. I think these views should be shifted out so that you can more clearly focus on the question of what's left to believe in.

Despite the disclaimers of the essay, the final impact is to shatter long-held beliefs. This raises some serious questions: Can most people withstand such an assault? Is it enough merely to write a critique without offering some hopeful way forward? By accident or design,

isn't present religious teaching as successful as one could hope for because it ministers to the needs of different people on different levels?

On the point of criticism without a proposed solution:

One shortcoming of critical work is that it only does half the job. It wrecks the tottering old house, but does not provide shelter for the family that used to live there. Once the falsity of old-fashioned ideas is exposed, the new dilemma is, where do we go from here?

By no means does this suggest that you must be an oracle pointing out an exact route. It could mean an appeal to scholars and thinkers to help define solutions. It might be that you could recommend some possibilities--discussion groups in parishes, publications in journals, etc. to address the issue.

Useful as criticism is, it must not sink back into a soft chair of repose. The image comes to mind of Frenchmen who, since the Age of Reason, have done little but spend their lives in sidewalk cafes criticizing the world superbly, yet failing to come to grips with its problems.

On the question of can most people withstand the assault:

Challenging long-held and complex beliefs is risky if the person isn't a fellow traveler or isn't receptive to new ideas.

This observation arises out of personal experience

with an older brother. I share many of your views about religious beliefs, yet any mention of these doubts unnerves my brother. An intelligent, insightful person, he was brought up in the old-fashioned way--to accept church teachings as a matter of faith. He grows angry and argumentative when I confess some doubt (the divinity of Jesus, for example). It is as if I have betrayed our church and our parents. So I have learned to steer clear of any religious conversation.

Religion addresses itself to what life is all about, why are we here, what's the purpose of it all? Trimming away some of the religious beliefs may seem to many to be tampering with life itself and its meaningfulness.

On the success of present religious practice:

I think your paper leaves the impression that ministers are failing in religious leadership. It is an assumption worth exploring.

My own view is that any sophisticated church deals with different levels of enlightenment in different ways. The unskilled Catholic worker may diligently pursue ritual and prayer, accepting church teaching en toto as a matter of faith. Another might agree with your position and rely more on meditation. So different levels of sophistication can exist side by side. Who is to say that one is more meaningful than the other? Is it really necessary that all of them

accept the same vision?

It seems to me that the Hindus solved this problem very nicely by recognizing five or six ways to achieve nirvana: asceticism, the way of good works, etc. It may be that Christian practice, in effect, allows this multiple approach, too. Some research on this point with ministers might shed some light on the matter.

As a final point, it might be useful to elaborate somewhat on what religion has accomplished. How well would people and nations interact in the absence of shared values? Perhaps this could be part of the introduction to instruct the reader that you are aware of religion's contributions but want to address its shortcomings. I'm not sure this point comes across clearly.

Respondent 3:

First of all, I think the paper was very well handled and very creatively written. I myself could relate very easily to everything that you said--to your conclusions and to the summary.

I think that one of the problems with this kind of thing is in your readership. The paper assumes a certain educational level, I think, by the reader even though it is written for lay people. The concepts that are brought out are aimed at an educated lay reader. There might be problems in the type of audience you may have. Some groups or constituencies will get a lot more out of it than some others.

I suppose I am coming from a framework in which I assume that the majority of people who are affiliated with an institution in almost any denomination are people who probably haven't given a great deal of thought to this kind of thing. The concepts that are discussed, even though they might seem very basic, I think to the general religious public are not so. Even the concept of love, which might seem very simple, to many people that is not something that they can really grasp.

I tend to see almost everything connected with the institutional church, rightly or not, in either a social or psychological context. It seems to me that the great majority of affiliates are really not able to deal with these

concepts, whether because they cannot understand them or are not ready to deal with them--because, for the most part, they are not fully developed people. The trouble is, when people are in the habit of living a very simplistic life, they are not accustomed to dealing with complex ideas. There will be a great number of people who will find this very valuable--and I think it is valuable, but I also think that there will be at least an equal number of people who will not be able to relate to it, and I'm not sure that you can expect that they could.

I very much liked your use of humor--you have some great humor. You may not have intended it to be humorous, and I'm sure that some people would not consider these parts I enjoyed to be humorous. For instance, the reference to creation as not being "the work of a cosmic magician, who presumably performs other equally surprising tricks." And, "moreover, it perverts the good news of God's unconditional love for all people into a crass assurance of divine partiality, turning God into a kind of cosmic rabbit's foot"--that's terrific. I loved your discussion of ritual in the last chapter. I had to chuckle--it's really so apropos.

I liked throughout your picking up on the fact that people need a sense of security and are looking for something sort of exotic. Your use of personal ecstasy and related phrases at times I think is very good.

In the discussion of God's love, where you say,

"Would it not covet for them that quality of experience and lure them toward it," I don't like the use of the word "lure." It has a suggestion of manipulation which I don't think I could buy theologically. What about the word "draw"? If I thought someone were luring me toward something, whether it's Christianity or anything else, I would back off the other way immediately. As you use the word "lure," you are projecting the idea that another power is influencing us. When you talk about being lured in this direction, my thoughts immediately go to the idea of instinctual craving or leaning toward a higher being, which to me could explain the lure.

I liked the part on providence and prayer--that was one of my favorites. Your discussion of how people perceive prayer I think is great; also, your conclusions about it. And, really, you made simple, clearcut statements in each area as far as stating your own beliefs. For instance, the definition of prayer, of how you perceive God, and how you perceive Jesus, and I thought that was always very well done.

I thought your discussion of sin and salvation was excellent--one of the strongest of any of the chapters. These are really concepts that I can relate to, probably because of the fact that it is heavily psychological.

I like the way you use idolatry. That's exactly the way I see it. A lot of these things become just that.

Unfortunately, many people will not understand or perceive how these things can really become idols.

One spot where I thought you could have elaborated a little bit was where you say, "It is not that Christianity does not involve people at a very personal and individual level. Indeed, that is surely the only way it can involve them at all." While I understand what you mean by that, many people would not. Depending upon who is reading it, it would be nice just to give an example, although you really did elsewhere.

The kind of overview you have given certainly is useful in dealing with these subjects. You sketch these questions and how they are related very well. The questions you raise are important because I think many people wonder about the inconsistencies of the doctrines of the Church-- and they are inconsistent with reality.

I think the questions are troubling to a lot of people, but I think in feeling troubled about them, many people especially in the Church have tended to kind of back off and say, well, let's just not get into that. I don't buy it, and as a result I just won't be involved. There are probably a lot of people just like me in that respect.

The method and style of the paper encourage the reader to deal with these questions because what you do after you present a topic for consideration is you point out the various ways people perceive this topic and then you

point out the problems in those ways of perceiving them. I think that's good; that's one of the strengths of it. I think it comes through very strongly that you are not trying to impose your own viewpoint and philosophy on the reader. It seems to me that most people are unwilling to face the unknown because it is traumatic. They cannot risk it because it is too threatening. That goes back to the psychological framework in which one grows up. If one has a strong self-concept, one learns to be able to risk facing the unknown.

You raise valid questions about things that have been troublesome to me, too. Some people may not be able to deal with these questions because they are unable to approach them from such an open perspective. These people seem to have such strong needs of their own that cannot apparently be fulfilled in any other way than from grabbing onto inflexible church doctrines. Or, guilt may drive them in this direction, too.

I was really quite favorably impressed by the whole thing, and I thought it was, for the most part, very clearly written. Actually, I felt more enlightened about my own positions on these matters from having read it. You put things in a perspective which legitimates many of my own feelings. I think you are legitimating what is in the minds of many people. Within the Church there are an inordinate number of people, I think, who are just simply not open, who are not acculturated to being open to other

ideas. I noticed that you did not try to make assumptions about what your readers thought, and I thought this was a good approach.

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